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Week of
October 21, 1940

*Critics'*

# THEATRE REVIEWS

## INDEX


| Stage Play | Pages |
|---|---|
| Another Sun | 382, 383, 384 |
| At the Stroke of Eight | 385, 386 |
| Billy Draws a Horse | 436, 437, 438 |
| †*Blind Alley | 252, 253, 254 |
| Boyd's Daughter | 256, 257, 258 |
| *Boys and Girls Together | 266, 267, 268 |
| Burning Deck (The) | 376, 377, 378 |
| Case of Youth (A) | 357, 358 |
| †*Charley's Aunt | 249, 250, 251 |
| Christmas Eve | 427, 428, 429 |
| *Du Barry Was a Lady | 439, 440, 441 |
| Earl Carroll's Vanities | 418, 419, 420 |
| Farm of Three Echoes | 448, 449, 450 |
| Fifth Column (The) | 370, 371, 372 |
| Geneva | 403, 404, 405 |
| †*George Washington Slept Here | 246, 247, 248 |
| Gondoliers (The) | 269, 270, 271 |
| Goodbye in the Night | 364, 365, 366 |
| Grey Farm | 317, 318 |
| Hamlet | 442, 443, 444 |
| Heavenly Express | 325, 326, 327 |
| *Helizapoppin | 493, 494, 495 |
| Higher and Higher | 337, 338, 339 |
| *Hold On to Your Hats | 278, 279, 280 |
| International Incident (An) | 340, 341, 342 |
| *It Happens on Ice | 259, 260, 261 |
| John Henry | 421, 422, 423 |
| *Johnny Belinda | 274, 275, 276 |
| Journey to Jerusalem | 262, 263, 264 |
| Juno and the Paycock | 415, 416, 417 |
| Jupiter Laughs | 281, 282, 283 |
| Keep off the Grass | 302, 303, 304 |
| Key Largo | 451, 452, 453 |
| *Kind Lady | 286, 287, 288 |
| Kindred | 430, 431, 432 |
| King Richard II | 343, 344, 345 |
| Ladies and Gentlemen | 469, 470, 471 |
| Ladies in Retirement | 351, 352, 353 |
| Lady in Waiting | 348, 349, 350 |
| Leave Her to Heaven | 379, 380, 381 |
| *Life With Father | 457, 458, 459 |
| Liliom | 354, 355, 356 |
| Little Foxes (The) | 490, 491, 492 |

| Stage Play | Pages |
|---|---|
| *Louisiana Purchase | 296, 297, 298 |
| Love for Love | 293, 294, 295 |
| Love's Old Sweet Song | 319, 320, 321 |
| Male Animal (The) | 424, 425, 426 |
| *Man Who Came to Dinner (The) | 472, 473, 474 |
| Man Who Killed Lincoln (The) | 412, 413, 414 |
| Margin for Error | 460, 461, 462 |
| Medicine Show | 331, 332, 333 |
| Morning Star | 328, 329, 330 |
| Morning's at Seven | 445, 446, 447 |
| My Dear Children | 400, 401, 402 |
| Night Music | 385, 386, 387 |
| Out From Under | 315, 316 |
| Passenger to Bali (A) | 367, 368, 369 |
| Philadelphia Story (The) | 487, 488, 489 |
| Pins and Needles | 496, 497 |
| Return of the Vagabond (The) | 307, 308, 309 |
| Reunion in New York | 388, 389, 390 |
| Romeo and Juliet | 310, 311, 312 |
| Russian Bank | 299, 300, 301 |
| See My Lawyer | 478, 479, 480 |
| *Separate Rooms | 359, 360 |
| Scene of the Crime (The) | 346, 347 |
| Sim Sala Bim | 283, 284 |
| Skylark | 475, 476, 477 |
| Strangler Fig (The) | 313, 314 |
| Streets of Paris (The) | 484, 485, 486 |
| Suspect | 334, 335, 336 |
| Taming of the Shrew (The) | 397, 398, 399 |
| Theatre of the Piccoli | 361, 362, 363 |
| *There Shall Be No Night | 322, 323, 324 |
| Time of Your Life (The) | 463, 464, 465 |
| *Tobacco Road | 498, 499, 500 |
| Too Many Girls | 466, 467, 468 |
| Two for the Show | 394, 395, 396 |
| Two on an Island | 409, 410, 411 |
| Unconquered (The) | 391, 392, 393 |
| Walk With Music | 290, 291, 292 |
| Weak Link (The) | 373, 374, 375 |
| When We Are Married | 433, 434, 435 |
| World We Make (The) | 454, 455, 456 |
| Yokel Boy | 481, 482, 483 |
| Young Couple Wanted | 406, 407, 408 |


* *Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of October 21, 1940.*
† *"Blind Alley" opened last Tuesday, October 15th, at the Windsor Theatre.*
† *"Charley's Aunt" opened last Thursday, October 17th, at the Cort Theatre.*
† *"George Washington Slept Here" opened last Friday, October 18th, at the Lyceum Theatre.*

**THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS**

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# "George Washington Slept Here"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 19, 1940*

## "George Washington Slept Here" Comedy Shot at Human Frailty

"George Washington Slept Here," comedy by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. Produced by Sam H. Harris at the Lyceum Theatre, New York, Oct. 18, 1940.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

THE newest Kaufman-Hart frolic, a comedy called "George Washington Slept Here," which was introduced at a redecorated Lyceum Theatre last night, is one about a timid little man suffering from patriotic urges and a back-to-nature impulse.

It is, I should say, Class B Kaufman-Hart. But their Class B is a shade better than a majority of their contemporaries' Class A. Which is all to the good. "George Washington Slept Here" is smartly amusing, but more than a trifle forced.

In the forcing process the actors, all blessed with talent, have become Kaufman and Hart conscious. Each one knows, that he or she has been entrusted with some pretty clever things to say and doesn't intend to let the opportunity pass without making the most of it.

The result emphasizes spoken lines at the expense of story and character. And this is always a costly proceeding in comedy building.

### Newton Buys a Home

Newton Fuller was a natural nature lover. He hated city life and loathed town apartments. His one ambition was to have a real home in the country, and when he came upon an abandoned place down Bucks County way he up and bought it without even consulting Mrs. Fuller.

Now Mrs. Fuller was a town girl. She loved the smell of automobile exhausts and steaming asphalt and she thrived on window shopping. A lark to her was a bust at the Stork Club and a bird song at sunrise was a pain in the neck.

For two and a half of the three acts into which "George Washington Slept Here" is divided, Mrs. Fuller has a field day as a witty grouser at Sucker Fuller's expense.

The house he buys, where legend has it George Washington slept, not only turns out to be the one with a dry well and no road right of way, but also the place where Benedict Arnold, and not Washington, passed a night.

The natives gyp Mr. Fuller and the mortgage is about to be foreclosed when a couple of funny things happen, including an extravagant family drinking bout and a recovery of the Fuller status quo.

### Good Types

The comedy is, as said, smartly amusing and the characters human types, even when thrown out of focus for the sake of a laugh. The most consistent of the group are Percy Kilbride, playing one of his more laconic hired hands, one who reluctantly gets the gullible Fuller deeper and deeper into trouble, and Ernest Truex as the gullible one himself, a little man with an honest vision and not too much sense.

Jean Dixon is a fine type for the sarcastic and cynical Mrs. F., though the burden of getting the most out of every K and H quip is beginning to haunt her.

Dudley Digges plays an irritating uncle with good comedy results, there is a brat of a boy perfectly realized by Bobby Readick, Ruth Weston visualizes a striking Summer theatre gal, Paula Trueman has a nice character bit as a pregnant maid and Mabel Taliaferro and Richard Barbee walk in and out with a couple of bits that are backed by good training.

The settings are by John Root and completely fitting. Mr. Kaufman's direction is as intelligent as usual, but he does have a time holding his players on the conservative side.

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK TIMES, *October 19, 1940*

## George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart Satirize a Country Idyl in 'George Washington Slept Here'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AS PROPERTY OWNERS in Bucks County, Pa., George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart are now putting their country estates to work. "George Washington Slept Here," which was acted at the Lyceum last evening, is a farce about the rigors of country living. The setting, which John Root has designed, represents the living room of Mr. Hart's luxurious shack with his dining room fireplace filling one end of the stage. Using odds and ends of Hart House as props, Mr. Kaufman and Moss Hart have improvised a vaudeville about the city man who discovers the country. Apart from the actors, who are off the top-shelf, "George Washington Slept Here" is a labored and empty enterprise. Only good taste prevents this column from observing that George Washington could have slept there without missing amusement of any particular consequence.

The intellectuals always suspect Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Hart of spreading their comedies thin and of using hackneyed plot devices. Whether they do or not is not a matter of importance if the results are entertaining. But this time the charges fit. For the introductory act is routine wise-cracking, and the plot, when it arrives late in the evening, reaches to the bottom of the barrel for the old mortgage sequence. Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Hart have gone through the motions of playwriting without taking much fresh enjoyment in what they are doing.

• • •

Since Mr. Kaufman staged the farce, give them credit for writing in terms of actors. They know how to select actors and how to use them. Ernest Truex, for example, is giving his best performance as the city man afflicted with rural rhapsody. The play skillfully uses the comic emphasis of his diminutive farce playing. As the boring uncle, Dudley Digges is at the top of his form, puffing and chuckling with fatuous humor. Although Jean Dixon's part is mechanically monotonous in the first half of the play, she can speak devastating lines with epical force and latitude. When the part gathers human warmth she knows how to communicate it neatly. As the doleful country almanac, Percy Kilbride is vastly amusing. And there are good performances all the way through by Paula Trueman, Ruth Weston, Mabel Taliaferro, Peggy French, Kendall Clark and Bobby Readick.

When these actors are carving little curlicues of humor out of the knots and twigs the authors toss them, "George Washington Slept Here" has a bright look and sound. Good actors provide the satisfaction that comes from seeing and hearing bits well done. But the story of country complaints—of reluctant Nature, casual local labor and week-end guests—is sparing in invention and half-hearted in the telling.

Votaries of wit can still worship at the shrine of "The Man Who Came to Dinner," which is worth a hundred drowsy Washingtons, Kaufmans and Harts.

# "George Washington Slept Here"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK SUN, *October 19, 1940*

## 'George Washington Slept Here' Opens at the Lyceum Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

IF "George Washington Slept Here," which opened at the Lyceum last evening, had been written by a couple of playwrights named Joe there would be occasion today for a moderate amount of adjective tossing. "George Washington Slept Here" would be a mighty funny little play to be written by a couple of playwrights named Joe, and everybody could predict that the boys were going places. "George Washington Slept Here" was, however, written by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, who have already gone places and done things.

They have gone to far funnier places than they go in their new comedy, and done far livelier things. Their glittering past throws a shadow over this section of their immediate present and if the fault is anybody's it is Mr. Kaufman's and Mr. Hart's. They've just taught us to expect too much; have once or twice set their standard of mordant comedy so high that now they stumble over it. "George Washington Slept Here" is just a moderately amusing little play about some people who bought a tumble-down house in Pennsylvania and had troubles in it.

It can hardly be difficult for any one, even for those of us not gifted as are Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Hart, to imagine the difficulties they encountered. They dug a well for months without striking water and when they did it was somebody else's water. The farm, for reasons not entirely clear to me, simply ate gravel. Japanese beetles ate everything else. The roof leaked and the fireplace smoked and whenever it stormed the lights went out. Mr. Fuller remained hopeful in the face of all this; Mrs. Fuller bristled with Kaufman and Hart wisecracks. In the second act people came to visit them, including a crusty old uncle who hated drafts, but was generally supposed to be extravagantly rich.

This is thin plot for two acts, and the plotting — that intangible element which makes thin plot seem thick — is noticeably below the standard of the usually inventive authors. A lot of the cracks are as bright as ever, but the spaces in between seem wider. Even Miss Jean Dixon, exercising that dry brilliance of hers in the role of Mrs. Fuller, is left rather too dry at moments by the ebbing plot. Ernest Truex, who can bubble so, has rather to work at it.

The authors mix things up in the last act, which has much of the old pace and the old crackle. (The Fullers nearly lose the place in this one, but bluff and double-bluff see them through). Everybody gets drunk, the plot scrambles into farce and the audience almost howls. An act like that would make the reputation of a couple of playwrights named Joe. But from the actual authors of "George Washington Slept Here" we expect three acts like that. This time, I am grieved to report, we simply don't get them.

We get a lot else—sharp lines, pungent insults, a child-pest of the first water, and some admirably droll playing when opportunity permits. In addition to Miss Dixon and, in the last act particularly, Mr. Truex, the droll playing is contributed by such irrepressibles as Percy Kilbride, Dudley Digges, Ruth Weston and Paula Trueman. You could hardly hope for a better cast, with Mr. Digges puffingly outrageous as the wily uncle; Mr. Kilbride gloomily engaging as the hired man; Miss Weston refreshingly caustic as a summer theater actress loosely entangled in the plot. But you could, considering everything, hope for a better play. Something, say, like "The Man Who Came to Dinner."

**'GEORGE WASHINGTON SLEPT HERE'**

A comedy in three acts by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart; staged by Mr. Kaufman; setting by John Root; presented by Sam H. Harris at the Lyceum Theater on October 18, 1940. The cast:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mr. Kimber | Percy Kilbride |
| Newton Fuller | Ernest Truex |
| Annabelle Fuller | Jean Dixon |
| Madge Fuller | Peggy French |
| Steve Eldridge | Kendall Clark |
| Katie | Grace Valentine |
| Mrs. Douglas | Mabel Taliaferro |
| Clayton Evans | George Baxter |
| Rena Leslie | Ruth Weston |
| Hester | Paula Trueman |
| Raymond | Bobby Readick |
| Uncle Stanley | Dudley Digges |
| Leggett Fraser | David Orrick |
| Tommy Hughes | Edward Elliott |
| Sue Barrington | Marian Edwards |
| Miss Wilcox | Toni Sorel |
| Mr. Prescott | Richard Barbee |

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK POST, *October 19, 1940*

## "George Washington Slept Here" Reaches Lyceum

By JOHN MASON BROWN

ALTHOUGH "George Washington Slept Here" includes its very funny lines and scenes, it refuses to take its place among the happier products of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. It can not hold a candle to "The Man Who Came to Dinner." It is not to be mentioned in the same breath with "You Can't Take It With You."

If the evening it provides is slightly less than fair-to-middling, in spite of interludes such as only these two madcap dramatists know how to concoct, the reason is that, with the exception of the hilarious drinking scene which brightens the last act, Mr. Kaufman's and Mr. Hart's new farce remains to its shaky ending a good idea rather than a good play.

What the gifted authors of "George Washington Slept Here" have done is to write about the familiar trials of any city-dweller who, in a rash moment of surrender to the country's spell, has bought an old house—a house of Revolutionary vintage—and taken on the costly responsibilities of making it livable. But the trouble with their new farce, notwithstanding the occasional fleetness of its wisecracks, is that in it Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Hart have catalogued the perils of country life instead of damatizing them.

The lack of water, the roof which leaks, the plumbing problem, the threat of the Japanese beetle, the high cost of gravel, the reluctance of hens to lay, the need of farm trees to be sprayed, the hazards of drilling a well, the difficulties with domestics, the expense of road-building, the dilemma of the rainy week-end —all these and a hundred other rural liabilities are inventoried in vaudeville terms at the Lyceum.

Although an occasional character comes through, such as the brat Bobby Readick realizes in all his peskiness or the old uncle pretending to be rich that Dudley Digges acts excellently, the play's good idea gets lost in thinly realized types, in obvious gags which labor obviously, in a group of young people who do little more than clutter up the stage, and in a plot which falls asleep even before it dies an unnatural death.

A wisecrack is always a joy when spoken by Jean Dixon. Ernest Truex is a likable farceur even when, as in this case, he is working overtime. But most of the characters in "George Washington Slept Here" are as nebulously written as the neighbor Mabel Taliaferro plays. The result is neither the grand fun one had anticipated nor the special fun associated with Mr. Kaufman's and Mr. Hart's names.

Their new farce lacks among other things a point of view. Its authors defend the city or attack the country as mug-wumps. They can write wittily. And they do rise, even in such an indifferent sample of their skill, to the superlative foolishness of their last act drinking scene. But the final comment on their new play is that it is not nearly so amusing as the revival of "Charley's Aunt."

# "George Washington Slept Here"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *October 19, 1940*

## George Washington Slept Here Thoroughly Enjoyable Play

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

THE Kaufman-Hart combination is in again, this time with a bucolic episode called George Washington Slept Here, which chronicles the tribulations of a family man who craves—and gets—a "little place in the country to call his own." It is far more mellow in its nature than The Man Who Came to Dinner and far less lunatic than You Can't Take It with You. But what it loses in caustic, urban wisecracking it makes up in the more solid substance of its situations and the wider appeal of its humor. Not everybody in the world, believe it or not, knows Alexander Woollcott. Everybody knows Newton Fuller, the sentimental little American who wants just a piece of land.

• • •

George Washington Slept Here is a record of the Fuller family, Newton and his wife, Annabelle, and their daughter, Madge, who are hypnotized into taking over one of those windowless, waterless, almost roofless stone houses that dot the picturesque Pennsylvania countryside. The ensuing troubles may be summed up as a search for water, a quarrel with a neighbor who owns not only the brook but the very road that leads from the highway to the house, the attempted elopement of the daughter with a married summer-theater actor, and the usual invasion of week-end guests, including a prodigal uncle who is assumed to be rich but who turns out to be just another bankrupt.

The Kaufman-Hart deus ex machina by which these difficulties are solved is a piece of paper, a map that shows they own not only their own property but nearly all of the belligerent neighbor's including his wells and his road.

Mr. Kaufman or Mr. Hart, or both, seem to side with the wise man who advocated a general anesthetic for all juveniles upon reaching the age of 12 and their reawakening only when they have arrived at 21 or so. For they have invented a young fiend (one of the characters names him well and truly Huckleberry Capone) who is so villainous that even the orchestra customers were hissing last night.

• • •

Of the other characters, and with due apologies to Ernest Truex's characterization of the beleaguered home owner, I most enjoyed a farm hand, or handy man, or man-of-no-work, whom the authors call Mr. Kimber and who, in the hands of the solemn-visaged and twangy-voiced Percy Kilbride, became one of the most engaging figures I have met with in some years. Mr. Kilbride puts on this part like a pair of old overalls, and it fits him perfectly. A truly magnificent performance.

Mr. Truex himself happily showing no signs of his recent distressing accident, played with exuberance and captured all the amusing innocence of his role's chief victim of the back-to-the-land movement. He fairly bubbled in the joy of property-ownership; he was courageous and dauntless under the repeated blows showered on him by circumstance; he showed all the wistful qualities of the breed of men who, believing themselves homo sapiens, are really homo saps.

Jean Dixon gave an exceptionally appealing performance of the unfortunate wife, and that master of character study, Dudley Digges, was excellent as usual as the impecunious uncle.

The remainder of the company were well cast, with Bobby Readick superb as the nasty little boy and a host of good people, including particularly Helen Weston, Peggy French, Paula Trueman and Kendall Clark, filling in the picture admirably.

George Washington Slept Here is a thoroughly enjoyable play and one full of laughter.

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *October 19, 1940*

## Rural Picture

By RICHARD WATTS, Jr.

FINDING themselves in one of their mellow moods, the Messrs. Kaufman and Hart have written a friendly and distinctly pleasant little comedy about city people in the country. Although they have devised for Miss Jean Dixon one of those sardonic roles she plays so triumphantly and have one or two bitter things to say about rural life, the playwrights were obviously feeling benevolent when they constructed "George Washington Slept Here," and the result is a play that is benign, rather than astringent. It is pretty mechanical, too, if you want to be captious, but there is so much good-natured fun, such shrewd observation of the strange things existence in the country can do to otherwise sane urban folk and such a quantity of characteristic Kaufman and Hart attractively brittle wit that, combined with the good acting and shrewd staging, an amusing and likeable evening in the theater is provided.

• • •

The comic conceits that "George Washington Slept Here" offers have been strung together on the frailest framework of a plot. This is merely the rueful saga of a little man who longed wistfully and romantically to have a place in the country, and how he got his wish, heaven help him. His wife, it appears, did not by any means share his enthusiasm for the project. The whole idea seemed ridiculous to her, and for a couple of acts the playwrights gave evidence of sharing her distaste. In fact, there were times when it did look as if the Messrs. Kaufman and Hart had become propagandists and were busy arguing against the summertime trek from city to country. Everything that the authors could devise goes wrong with the home that the unfortunate Fullers had picked out, including the fact that it wasn't really George Washington who had slept there at all. It was Benedict Arnold.

• • •

Then, just as the Fullers are about ready to lose their home to a nasty neighbor, the authors step in and rescue it. Their method of doing so consists of some mechanical plot manipulations which I cannot praise with any great enthusiasm, but I do admire the sentimental attachment for the old Pennsylvania homestead that illumines the story devices of the last act. Even the sardonic wife breaks down and has a good cry about life in Bucks County, and everything is pleasantly touching. Fortunately there is not too much of that sort of thing. Happily the authors have time to set down such excellent characterizations, observed rather than imagined, as an inefficient hired hand, a temperamental maid and, best of all, a magnificently evil boy, who is understandably compared during the course of the play with Leopold, Loeb and Capone. Then, too, lest one Jean Dixon role should not be enough, the Messrs. Kaufman and Hart have written two of them and wisely cast Miss Ruth Weston for the other one. It makes for such good fun that I didn't bother much about the fabricated quality of the story.

• • •

Give Miss Dixon the right sort of role and she is one of the most wonderful actresses in the world. It should be enough to say that she is perfect in the new play. Ernest Truex is back from his Hollywood sojourn to give one of his characteristically engaging and amusing portrayals of a baffled little man. Dudley Digges, stepping into the role originally intended for the late Burton Churchill, plays a pompous fake of an uncle like the fine actor that he is. Miss Weston is splendid as a sardonic actress, in the role that is virtually the counterpart of the one Miss Dixon has. Percy Kilbride, that fine comedian, has his best role as the hired man, and he manages it epically. Miss Paula Trueman gives another of her quietly humorous characterizations as the troubled maid and young Bobby Readick, as the demon child, drew the first audience hisses of the season as a tribute to the mercilessness of his portrayal. The others manage their lesser roles excellently. Incidentally, there is a particularly fine drinking scene in the last act. "George Washington Slept Here" is chiefly just a string of incidents, but they are vastly amusing incidents.

# "Charley's Aunt"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK SUN, *October 18, 1940*

## 'Charley's Aunt,' Dean of the Farces, Is Revived at the Cort Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

THERE'S no way of telling how funny "Charley's Aunt" was in 1892, when it must have piled its first-night audience in the aisles like cordwood. Not much funnier, probably, than it was last evening at the Cort, where Day Tuttle and Richard Skinner have revived it, with Jose Ferrer in the role of aunty and handsome, comical people clustered all about him. Nothing could be much funnier than Mr. Ferrer and company.

The producers promise that they have followed Brandon Thomas's original script with scrupulous fidelity adding not a word and dropping not a wheeze, I suspect, without knowing anything about it, that they have—and suspect also that it is not so much the script as what you do with it. Mr. Ferrer and the rest make it as broad as it is long. They whoop it up and pack it with funny business. Mr. Ferrer's furious ogling of Kitty and Amy must surely go further, and funnier than the polite customs of 1892 would have sanctioned. Did they thumb noses openly in those days, do you suppose? Did audiences explode when aunty mistook the meaning of "au revoir"? Or didn't they get, as at the Cort we so fortunately get, the opportunity?

Probably everybody knows something of the absurd, incredible yarn in which this byplay is imbedded. It begins in Jack Chesney's rooms at Oxford and Jack and his friend Charley are hosts to lovely girls. Charley's aunt from Brazil, "where the nuts come from," is due to chaperone, but is delayed. And so Lord Fancourt Babberley, dressed for amateur theatricals in black satin and gray wig, is pressed into service. Mr. Thomas went on from there. There is no describing how he went on from there, with pompous uncles falling in love with the fictitious Donna Lucia, and Lord Babberley's own true love turning up with the real Donna Lucia and everybody racing madly through the Oxford gardens and the false aunty leeringly caressing the prettiest girls. It is crazy fun; it has stretched laughter across the years from 1892 to 1940.

Mr. Ferrer's performance is clowning in the grand manner and as funny playing as you are apt to find around. Now and then, to be sure, he overdoes it a little. It is possible to overdo even "Charley's Aunt," although obviously pretty difficult. But even when Mr. Ferrer works at it he is hilarious. Nor are the rest far behind. Thomas Speidel and J. Richard Jones are wide-eyed and comical as the Oxford students who struggle at the bottom of the plot. Harold deBecker is a joyous Brassett and Arthur Margetson a delicious Sir Francis. Mary Mason and Phyllis Avery are delightful to look at, and funny, too; Reynolds Denniston, as Stephen Spettigue, is the ideal butt of the final jest and Nedda Harrigan and Katherine Wiman add both grace and charm to the rushing absurdity.

The orchestra does, to be sure, play soft, irritating music through much of the second act. One or two scenes do represent furious pumping from a dried up well of comedy. But these are small flaws in a largely funny evening—an evening all incredible nonsense, and jollity. "Charley's Aunt" is old wine in a new bottle, and an admirable basis for a spree.

**'CHARLEY'S AUNT'**

A farce in three acts by Brandon Thomas; staged by Joshua Logan; settings and costumes by John Koenig; revived at the Cort Theater on October 17, 1940, by Day Tuttle and Richard Skinner. The cast:

Jack Chesney.....Thomas Speidel
Brassett.....Harold deBecker
Charles Wykeham.....J. Richard Jones
Lord Fancourt Babberley.....Jose Ferrer
Kitty Verdun.....Mary Mason
Amy Spettigue.....Phyllis Avery
Col. Sir Francis Chesney.....Arthur Margetson
Stephen Spettigue.....Reynolds Denniston
Farmer.....Richard Cowdery
Donna Lucia D'Alvadorez.....Nedda Harrigan
Ela Delahay.....Katherine Wiman
Maud.....Mary Frances Heflin

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *October 18, 1940*

## Lady From Brazil

By RICHARD WATTS, Jr.

BELIEVE it or not, but a production of "Charley's Aunt," that English "Abie's Irish Rose" of the '90s, has reached town, and it turns out to be a delightfully amusing show. It isn't that the ancient Brandon Thomas farce has developed any sturdy artistic values. In itself "Charley's Aunt" is as creaking and as primitive as comedy can well be. The current version is strictly a triumph of acting and direction. With Jose Ferrer, that excellent young farceur, giving what can only be described as a brilliant performance in the leading role, with an excellent supporting cast performing perfectly and with hilariously inventive staging by Joshua Logan, this stage antique returns to astonishingly vigorous life, and I think it is certain to become one of the hits of the season.

• • •

Needless to say, when I am calling "Charley's Aunt" the "Abie's Irish Rose" of the last century I am not referring to its subject matter. It merely happens to have the quality of staying power, a great deal of the primitive audience appeal and about the equivalent dramatic value of the celebrated Anne Nichols work. Even without Mr. Logan's direction, it would probably be a bit funnier, though. But, happily, "Charley's Aunt" decidedly isn't without Mr. Logan's direction. His is a genuinely operative job of staging. The dangerous tendency is to present these works of an earlier day in a patronizing and condescending fashion. That is a sin that the current version never falls into. Certainly the play is not taken with any seriousness. But it is played straightforwardly for the comic relish that good acting and good staging can derive from it, and the result is life-giving.

• • •

This, if you will permit me to go autobiographical for a moment, is the fourth time I have seen this veteran comedy about the young Oxford man whose friends persuade him to impersonate a lady from Brazil to aid them in their romantic difficulties. The first time was back in 1926 in a very clumsy production at Daly's Sixty-third Street Theater. The second was a silent motion picture starring Sydney Chaplin, and the third was an early talking film with Charles Ruggles. I can say in all candor that the three versions had in common the fact that they were completely lacking in any suggestion of humor. Now, with the splendid staging and acting that have been provided for it and with the excellent costumes and settings by John Koenig, a thousand bits of shrewd comic business have been devised, a hundred threadbare comic speeches have been given life, and the result can be enjoyed for the good fun that is thereby created.

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It is safe to say that there is no more perilous business for a comedian to set himself to than to give what he fondly hopes will be an amusing impersonation of a woman. Usually the result turns out to be distasteful, as well as incredibly boring. But Mr. Ferrer is so engaging, as well as so direct and so ingenious, that his characterization of the harassed Lord Fancourt Babberley, dressed up as the aunt from Brazil, becomes a comic achievement that should place him high among contemporary comedians. Whether indulging in the sheer slapstick that has wisely been made so important a part of the play, or managing the less physical aspects of the role, he is a constant delight. The others are excellent, too. Particularly good, I thought, are Arthur Margetson and Reynolds Denniston as the suitors of the pseudo-aunt, and the extremely charming Miss Katherine Wiman as the hero's puzzled fiance. That, however, is not to detract from the good work of Thomas Speidel, Harold de Becker, J. Richard Jones, Miss Mary Mason, Miss Phyllis Avery, Miss Nedda Harrigan, and Miss Mary Frances Heflin. Who would have thought "Charley's Aunt" would turn out to be one of the hits of 1940?

# "Charley's Aunt"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK POST, *October 18, 1940*

## "Charley's Aunt" Given an Hilarious Revival

By JOHN MASON BROWN

"CHARLEY'S AUNT!" We had thought her dead; long dead; deader than Marley who, as you remember, was very dead indeed. As for Brandon Thomas' old farce we had assumed the only living thing in it was its famous contribution to the bad neighbor policy—"Brazil, where the nuts come from." Vaguely from college we remember seeing it at Boston's Copley Theatre when E. E. Clive was giving—and having—a very good time as the Oxford undergraduate who, when a chaperone is needed, is called upon to masquerade as another student's fabulously wealthy aunt from South America.

But that was twenty years ago. Had anyone told me that today, in this seventh year of Hitler, "Charley's Aunt" could not only prove one of Broadway's most uproarious entertainments but force an audience to laugh so hard that for two hours the sicknesses of the present could be forgotten and the world would once again seem sane and merry, I would have shaken my head, in your fashion, and accused that person of being the direct descendant of Baron Munchausen.

Day Tuttle and Richard Skinner are the producers who, after a summer theatre success with it, have had the courage to bring "Charley's Aunt" to the Cort. And at the Cort it is Joshua Logan in his direction and, above all, Jose Ferrer as the "aunt" who demonstrate brilliantly that so far as the forty-seven-year old Thomas farce is concerned, there's life in the old girl yet—and plenty of it.

### Uproarious Entertainment

Although stock companies, Little Theatres, schools and colleges have, of course, been toying with the play's cast-iron humors these many years, none of us realized until we saw the old farce again last night how resilient are its humors when it is staged with the fleetest invention and acted with irresistible unction.

Mr. Logan has done a superlative job as a director. He has captured just the right quality of fooling. He does not have to condescend to his materials. Their nonsense is apparently without a date. Happily he avoids those tiresome pranks at the expense of the conventions of an older theatre which are the stock-in-trade of spoof revivals. The custard pie he throws is as fresh as if it were made just before the curtain rose.

He knows the world loves a laugh, and laugh after laugh he provides. He has a proper respect for nonsense, however broad. And nonsense—imaginative in its contrivance or bold in its very reliance upon the time-honored devices of good slapstick—he supplies with a vigilant energy that carries everything before it.

Mr. Logan has, moreover, found some charming ladies to wander into the madhouse of his Oxford quadrangles. Mary Mason is a pleasant miss. Phyllis Avery looks lovely and has a lively sense of humor. Nedda Harrigan as Charley's real aunt is both helpful and handsome. Katherine Wiman has the beauty and the radiant coolness of a budding Evelyn Laye. Then John Koenig has costumed these academic intruders with grace and humorously established the period quality of his English backgrounds.

### Mr. Ferrer Excellent

The men make their contributions, too. Arthur Margetson is a droll farceur. Reynolds Denniston knows his business. And Thomas Speidel and J. Richard Jones add to the undergraduate gaiety. But the evening is Jose Ferrer's as it must, and should, be because, after all, Charley's make-believe aunt is to Mr. Thomas's farce what Hamlet is to another play that refuses to die.

Mr. Ferrer has always been a good actor. "Key Largo," in which he appeared in the prologue as the American who chose to die, was a proof of his serious skill. He did excellent work, too, in "Mamba's Daughter" and "Missouri Legend." Still it seems safe to say few of his admirers were prepared to find Mr. Ferrer give the perfect farcical performance he is giving at the Cort.

Mr. Ferrer has about him the same Puckish quality of mischief Romney Brent possesses. He never loses sight of the all-important fact that guffaws are the reason and excuse for the monkeyshines he is up to. He lets no laugh escape him. His pantomime is eloquent; his fooling inspired; his own high spirits are contagious. Every embarrassment a college boy dressed up as a Victorian aunt would undergo—of cause—he has found a side-splitting way of expressing.

If Mr. Ferrer has a Field Day, so does everyone else. He makes an old farce young. He gives it an hilarious new lease on life. He shows how diverting the simplest, most elementary fooling can be when its simplicity is matched by skill.

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK TIMES, *October 18, 1940*

## Brandon Thomas's 'Charley's Aunt' Revived, With Jose Ferrer in Title Part

By BROOKS ATKINSON

EVERY one at the Cort last evening seemed to be all broken down and unbent with laughter. For "Charley's Aunt," the old rocking-horse farce that dates from 1892, was being played as exuberantly as a man could expect. Last Summer Day Tuttle and Richard Skinner presented it, with José Ferrer in the title role, at the Westchester Playhouse. Westchester County loosened its stays and laughed. Under Joshua Logan's direction, which could hardly be more inventive, Mr. Ferrer is now going through the farce at a hop-skip and jump, which seems to be the right way to plunge through it; and he is admirably abetted by an excellent cast.

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Without burlesquing the farce, Mr. Logan has caught a nice accent of knowing enjoyment which acknowledges the hokum of the plot, yet savors the knockabout humor that lies in it. As the two Oxford boys, Thomas Speidel and J. Richard Jones have a startled look that is wholly amusing. The two young ladies are brightly played by Mary Mason and Phyllis Avery with gleaming innocence and mincing gestures. Nedda Harrigan, with the honest tradition of Harrigan and Hart behind her, knows how to relish a farce of his hand-me-down quality and how to be stunning in one of John Koenig's decorative costumes. As the third young lady, Katherine Wiman, daughter of Dwight Deere Wiman, is light-footed and dewily ingenuous. Harold de Becker, as the butler, has all the tricks of farce convention in his style; and Arthur Margetson and Reynolds Denniston play the two mature getlemen with the proper coughs, confusions and blandnesses. In such an ebullient performance it is only fair to toss bouquets in every actor's direction. For this is the most sagacious revival we have had out of the dusty old playbooks; and every one in the audience seemed to be beaming with pleasure.

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Nearly every one. For your correspondent, to tell the truth, was only mildly amused. Brandon Thomas's farce is only as funny as you find it. Your enjoyment, no doubt, is conditioned by your previous experience and degree of servitude. And to this correspondent, "Charley's Aunt," even in a genuinely bouncing performance, is only a brighter-than-average campus antic. It would take a cast including the Marx Brothers, Ed Wynn, Bert Lahr, Bobby Clark and Beatrice Lillie to make a brassbound hilarity out of it. Age has its limitations, and "Charley's Aunt" is no exception.

According to the files, it was first played in New York at the Standard Theatre, Thirty-third Street and Sixth Avenue, on Oct. 2, 1893, with Etienne Girardot as the harum-scarum aunt of Charley. On the next morning THE TIMES's critic remarked: "But, farce or comedy, it is without doubt really a play, one that depends entirely on action and situation, not all in the quality of its dialogue, the coruscation of the wit or the swiftness of repartee."

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Stet for 1940. Whether "Charley's Aunt" is uproarious or mildly amusing today, let's agree on two things: "Mr. Logan's direction is first rate theatre work; and José Ferrer, who has given several good performances in this neighborhood, is an able and versatile actor.

# "Charley's Aunt"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 18, 1940*

## "Charley's Aunt" Is Revived And There Is Much Laughter

"Charley's Aunt," farce comedy by Brandon Thomas. Revived by Day Tuttle and Richard Skinner at the Cort Theatre, New York, Oct. 17, 1940.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

THE farcical foundations of "Charley's Aunt" are so sound, and so familiar, that it seems to me the Messrs. Day and Tuttle, who revived the farce at the Cort Theatre last night, missed a bet by not trying to modernize it rather than to duplicate its performances of forty odd years ago.

In the old days the less believable a farce was the more hilarious audiences found it. They were trained in the ways of the artificial drama and expected nothing resembling sanity or reason in their comedies.

Nowadays the best of the farces and light comedies are provided with backgrounds of probability, and the characters are at least vaguely recognizable.

This revival is for those interested in revivals as stage antiques. This group may get as much fun from the Day-Tuttle restaging as did last night's audience—which was smart and youthful.

### In the Old Days

Here we have "Charley's Aunt" set back to 1892, when it first was produced in London. Blazer jackets, puffed sleeves, sappy college boys, lunatic old gentlemen, bowler hats and all the rest.

You will recognize all the farce tricks, for many of them originated with this piece and most of them have been repeated in a majority of the farces that have followed.

But the foundation, as I say, is solid and promising. Two college boys who want to have their girls in for tea in their rooms draft a third chum to impersonate his expected aunt from Brazil to act as chaperone.

The fake aunt, getting even with his tormenters, flirts extravagantly with the girls, ties the plot into a variety of farcical knots and isn't relieved of his skirt and wig until the joke's played out.

I may be wrong in believing this story could have been brought up to date, but the evening started so promisingly during the first scenes that it seemed a good idea at the time.

### The Performance

Jose Ferrer plays the aunt from Brazil, where the nuts come from. He mugs the part outrageously but mostly with hilarious results. He makes a good-looking and jolly old frump, and with just a bit more finesse and a bit less obvious effort his could have been a characterization to remember.

The girls are particularly attractive as stage adornments in the 1890 styles. Mary Mason, Phyllis Avery and Katherine Wiman are a fine trio of ingenues, and Miss Mason a good comedienne as well.

Arthur Margetson makes something almost human of a befuddled army chap and Nedda Harrigan is a pleasantly conservative influence as the real aunt.

Reynolds Denniston had the hard job of being forced to overplay in order to keep in the story. Harold deBecker served well as a man's man and Thomas Speidel and J. Richard Jones were no more innocuous than their director demanded.

Nice settings and costumes by John Koenig. Joshua Logan did the staging in the older manner.

"Charley's Aunt," with Etienne Girardot in the name part, was first played in New York in 1893 and ran three years here and on tour. It was revived in 1906, and played for another two years. In London it has been restaged 29 times.

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *October 18, 1940*

## Charley's Aunt Revival Triumph in Laughs

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

NOT this season, with the exception of the opening night of Ed Wynn's prodigiously funny show, have I heard an audience laugh so spontaneously or seen it so shaken by mirth as at last night's opening of the Day Tuttle and Richard Skinner revival of that whiskery—and still delightful—old farce of 48 years' standing, Charley's Aunt, at the Cort Theater.

The subject matter of this antique comedy should be pretty well known to everybody who ever went to a theater, for Charley's Aunt has been played more times, according to statisticians, than any play except Hamlet. Yet, under the agreeable and novel direction of Joshua Logan and with the youthful and accomplished cast that gave its uninhibited best to it, Charley's Aunt proved last night to be actually refreshing.

This is something of a triumph, and the success of the evening was due, first, to the happy co-operation of a company that has been taught to play farce as farce—not as polite comedy—and to play it so earnestly and enthusiastically that the impossible situation upon which it is based becomes believable. There was no coyness about this performance. It was unashamed.

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A second reason for the astonishing amount of fun that was extracted from this museum piece was the robust performance of Jose Ferrer in the leading role. Mr. Ferrer, who gave us a taste of solemn comedy in the mock heroic drama, Missouri Legend, threw delicacy and caution to the winds and showed us a prankish, mischievous and undismayed "aunt," without a trace of the simpering shyness that some of his predecessors have read into the role. He demonstrated a rare understanding of a medium that has almost vanished, unfortunately, from today's theater.

The company was well balanced, but special tribute should be paid to the feminine side and to those who had the good sense to cast them. It could not have been entirely by chance that three such lovely girls as Mary Mason, Katherine Wiman and Phyllis Avery should be found in one play. And their attitudes of Victorian delicacy, of timidity and of that wide-eyed and vapid mentality common to young women of the 'teen age were in exquisite keeping with the spirit of the play and the times.

Arthur Margetson and Reynolds Denniston shared acclaim in the secondary roles of Sir Francis Chesney and Stephen Spettigue—both of them accomplished farceurs. Harold deBecker provided a good comic butler and did not, providentially, attempt to overdo the part. Thomas Speidel and J. Richard Jones were the two young Oxonians, whose love affairs are the basis of the play, and both of them performed amiably.

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Mr. Tuttle and Mr. Skinner very wisely, I think, decided to refrain from cutting or otherwise tampering with the text. They let it speak for itself, giving us all the lines and letting the laughs fall where they may. They did not present it, furthermore, with any thought of burlesquing the old days or of insisting that Charley's Aunt is nothing but precious whimsy. The general attitude of the company, in all its direction, seemed to say that here was a brand new, modern play, built for solid entertainment.

With this treatment Charley's Aunt becomes funnier than ever, for, in addition to being farce, it is a commentary on the manners and morals of a stilted, unnatural and, through our eyes, foolish age.

Before closing I should, returning to the individual members of the cast, say a good word for Nedda Harrigan, whose laughing characterization of Donna Lucia D'Alvadorez is worth the whole price of admission.

Forty-Eighth St., with three good revivals on it, is beginning to be this drama season's life saver.

# "Blind Alley"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 16, 1940*

## "Blind Alley" Recalls Those Old Dillinger Gangster Days

"Blind Alley," drama by James Warwick. Revived by Marie Louise Elkins and Clarence Taylor at the Windsor, Oct. 15, 1940.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

THE revival of one of our best gangster melodramas, which is James Warwick's "Blind Alley," put on at the Windsor Theatre last night, reminds us that we have at least made some progress in the business of bringing criminals to book the last five years.

"Blind Alley" was first tried out in this territory the Summer of 1935 and brought to Broadway that Fall. It had previously been played at the Pasadena Playhouse in California, Mr. Warwick being a successful Hollywood scenarist at the time.

The gangster Dillinger had been roaming the West through the early thirties (he wasn't killed until 1934), and a couple of other tough fellows, Baby Faced Nelson and a fellow named Floyd, if memory serves, were frightening the daylights out of practically everybody except young Mr. Hoover and his FBI down in Washington.

### The Cleanup

Seems to me the worst gangs have been pretty well cleaned out since then. It is encouraging to be reminded of progress of this sort occasionally.

"Blind Alley," you may recall, is the drama about the gangster Hal Wilson who, with his mob, moved in on a psychiatry professor named Shelby down Huntington, L. I., way and took the Shelby cottage for two days. The mob was waiting for a boat to pick them up after a particularly nasty mess of shootings.

Prof. Shelby, becoming intensely interested in the gangster, as well as the motives that made him the tough he was, and also eager to play for time in the hope of getting word to the police, undertook to interest Wilson in a kind of home laboratory test.

Little by little he is able to expose the lad's subconscious motivations; to show that they had sprung from an unreasoning jealousy of a thoroughly bad mother and a deep hatred of a stepfather who had mistreated him.

### Tense and Sane

It is a tense play, intelligently written and projected. The story fascinates an audience through most of the three acts. The play earned 119 performances the season of 1935-36 and, from an audience-approval standpoint, deserved them.

Roy Hargrave was the gangster then, and gives an even more vivid performance in the revival. James Todd has succeeded George Coulouris as the psychiatrist, and makes a good job of the part, for all he lacks some of the Coulouris force.

Lila Lee is playing the frightened wife now, and Bernadene Hayes is Mazie, the gun moll —both agreeably competent.

The drama has been restaged by J. B. Daniels, working over a pretty thorough pattern set by Worthington Miner. And a new setting has been provided by Frederick Fox. Sounded to me as though a fresh sprinkling of profanity had been added. Natural enough, but mostly unnecessary, it seems to me.

The revival is at standard $2.20 top prices, and that should help it. There are not many serious plays on Broadway sale just now, and that also should help.

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK TIMES, *October 16, 1940*

## Roy Hargrave Reappears as the Terrified Gangster in a Revival of 'Blind Alley'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH the world has changed a good deal in the last years, "Blind Alley," which was revived at the Windsor last evening, is still an excellent melodrama. This is the James Warwick mental analysis of a gangster which —just to orient you in the march of affairs—opened in 1935 on the same evening when Joe Louis was knocking out Max Baer in the fourth round in the Yankee Stadium, which was then considered way uptown. Roy Hargrave, who appeared in the original production, has picked up the part of the haunted gangster where he left it after 119 performances, and although most of the cast is different now "Blind Alley" is still taut and literate and a test of nerve.

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In case you have forgotten, this is the ill-fated yarn of an outlaw who makes the mistake of hiding away in the house of a professor of psychology. Five years ago footloose desperadoes like Hal Wilson were sadistic public heroes. That was before Hitler took over gangsterism and promoted it into an international racket. When the curtain first rises on this revival, "Blind Alley" seems dated in its proportions.

But that odd echo of a world that was excited by minor violences is the only mark of age down Mr. Warwick's "Blind Alley." The story is still plausible, and it is cleverly told. When Hal Wilson, three jumps ahead of the law, takes refuge with his satellites in Professor Shelby's secluded house, he confronts something more terrifying than an armed posse. For the professor, who is a fearful psychiatrist, begins casually to probe into Hal's distorted mind. After a night and a day of a scientific inquisition, the gangster is completely unstrung and his capacity for making lightning decisions has vanished.

After a hackneyed opening scene, "Blind Alley" settles down to some particularly artful melodramatic writing—deliberate, calm, sharp, mordant. Around his armed plug-ugly Mr. Warwick winds a web of crushing truth. Mr. Hargrave plays the gangster as nervously as he did before, with cat-like movements and a bad case of the jitters. In the professor's part, which George Coulouris played originally, James Todd also gives an excellent performance. Lila Lee is handsome, which is a splendid way to play the part of any professor's wife, and Bernadene Hayes makes the part of a gangster's moll alluring.

Well directed by J. B. Daniels and well set by Frederick Fox, "Blind Alley" is an agreeable attack of nerves. After five years, things are much the same between Joe Louis and Max Baer, and between Broadway and "Blind Alley" also.

(Program note: Miss Lila Lee in Act I is knitting for "Bundles for Britain.")

# "Blind Alley"

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK SUN, *October 16, 1940*

## 'Blind Alley,' Psychological Thriller, Is Revived at the Windsor

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

FAILING new theatrical excitements, the old ones seem to stand up nicely. James Warwick's "Blind Alley," for example, is a good five years old and neither gangsters nor psychoanalysts are quite what they once were, gunplay and insanity both having expanded into the wholesale business. But Mr. Warwick's drama, which was revived at the Windsor last evening, is still a scary one; still a stimulating mixture of frightfulness and Freud.

And it is still at bottom something a little more than melodrama. You remember it, doubtless. It tells of a hapless young gangster, on the run with his girl and his gloomy assistants, who picks the home of a college professor for a temporary hideout. He does not dream that complexes will raise their heads, or that the professor, a delver into the subconscious, will take him apart. But, to the accompaniment of pistol shots and the clunk of falling bodies, the professor does just that. By the time the play ends the young gangster is a nervous wreck, and nothing is left for him but suicide.

The play often comes close to being the grisly study of abnormal psychology which Mr. Warwick must one time have had in mind. It deals darkly with mother fixations, masochism and the jealousies and dark hatreds celebrated in Greek tragedy. Mr. Warwick lightens all this with melodrama. Murder victims fall with each act's curtain and guns wave freely. There is much hard talk from the corners of mouths. But the relentless pursuit by science of the quavering human mind is pretty frightening and the play has long stretches of something which sounds uncomfortably like reality. "Blind Alley" raises the hair. It only misses doing something more.

Roy Hargrave heads the cast, as he did that of 1935. His performance is searing, all tortured nerves and terrified bewilderment, and in the end he makes the audience suffer with Hal Wilson, who had only a tommy-gun to protect him against psychoanalysis. The rest of the cast isn't quite up to that of the earlier production, although James Todd is a reasonable, effective Dr. Shelby and Bernadene Hayes an entirely satisfactory girl gangster, and nice to look at in addition. She is around quite a while, too; doesn't get rubbed out until the end of the second act. In "Blind Alley" that is durability.

**'BLIND ALLEY'**

A play in three acts by James Warwick, directed by J. B. Daniels; setting by Frederick Fox; revived at the Windsor Theater on October 15, 1940, by Marie Louise Elkins and Clarence Taylor. The cast:

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|---|---|
| Doris Shelby | Lila Lee |
| Fred Landis | Richard Sisson |
| Dr. William A. Shelby | James Todd |
| Agnes | Dodee Wick |
| Teddy | Michael Artist |
| Nora | Aline McDermott |
| Hal Wilson | Roy Hargrave |
| Mazie Stoner | Bernadene Hayes |
| Buck | Jay Adler |
| Nick | Jack Lambert |
| Officer Thorne | Thomas Hume |

*Reprinted from* NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *October 16, 1940*

## Revival of Blind Alley Shows Author's Ingenuity

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

THERE is an interesting contrast in the technique of crime, as imagined by playwrights, in two revivals now running within a stone's throw of each other on 48th St. Earlier in the season, William A. Brady opened the Playhouse for another visit of Kind Lady, with the exquisite actress, Grace George, in the starring role. Last night, Marie Louise Elkins and Clarence Taylor brought James Warwick's Blind Alley into the Windsor Theater, with Roy Hargrave in the part he created five years ago.

If you enjoyed Kind Lady as much as I did, then you will surely want to see Blind Alley, not because of the strange parallel that exists in the situations but because of the ingenuity with which each author has solved his problem. In both instances an innocent household is invaded by a band of gangsters. In Kind Lady the unwilling hostess defeats the criminals partly through her indomitable will and courage and in part by fortuitous circumstance. In Blind Alley the principal gangster is beaten by intellect.

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As the honors in Kind Lady go for the most part to Miss George, so in Blind Alley the play largely belongs to Mr. Hargrave who is today, as he was reputed to have been in 1935, "the best gangster on the American stage." Both plays lean heavily on psychology for their effect. The mounting dread and terror of Miss George's experiences as the gangsters' victim give Kind Lady its fascination. The progressive disintegration and final collapse of the bravado of the cop-killer in Blind Alley during three acts of inquiry into his mental processes, at the hands of a psychiatrist, provide Blind Alley its thrill.

I will not pretend to make any comparison between the company assembled for the current production and that which held the stage for something more than 100 performances in the season of 1935-36. There are in the play, after all, only two essential roles—the desperado and his inquisitor. Mr. Hargrave, as I said, takes the role of the killer and handles it with splendid realism. James Todd, as the psychiatrist, has the difficult task of following George Coulouris in the part.

* * *

The character of the psychiatrist, it seems to me, is one of the most difficult in this or any other similar melodrama. The portrayal of will-power and intellect sufficient to bear down and crush the murderous instinct in a criminal of the Dillinger type requires something more than the correct delivery of lines. It must contain something magnetic, psychic. There are times that Mr. Todd seems to have this quality and others when he is so devoid of it that the criminal, theoretically, should have killed him and thus ended the play in a way not intended by the author.

The third most important figure in Blind Alley is that of the gun moll who is killed in a quarrel at the second act climax. Bernadene Hayes, lately of Hollywood and last year one of the victims in a little flop called Aries Is Rising, gave a splendid performance of this character.

Altogether it was a competent and well balanced company, with Jay Adler, of the noted Adler family, a grim and sardonic Buck; Lila Lee a well-mannered but tense wife of the psychiatrist, and Dodee Wick, a personable nurse-maid.